Chapter 1
The Last Carriage

> *Nov. 9. Snow early. Ten children, four women, one boiler that knocks like a drunk at the door. Told Mrs. Pennington-Hale again about the east wiring. She says the money is in hand.*
>
> — From a watchman's notebook

Lena Ward had been telling herself it was a joke for three hours, and the story was wearing thin around the road.

The last of the interstate lay behind her, and ahead was a county route the plows had given up on. Her headlights found nothing but slanting white and, now and then, the reflective eyes of a mailbox. The wipers beat a slow time. She drove with both hands on the wheel and her shoulders low, the way her mother had taught her to drive in weather, and she kept one thought out of the car by humming.

She hummed the same four bars she always hummed when she was tired. She did not know where she had learned them. She had hummed them in medical school, over a cadaver, and in the stairwell of the hospital after

the first patient she lost. A resident once told her it sounded like a lullaby for the dead. She had said it was just something she did.

The satellite map on her phone had given out twenty minutes ago, and now the phone lay dark on the passenger seat, shut off to save the battery. She had her directions on the back of the invitation, in her own handwriting. *Left at the feed store. Right at the burned church. Straight until it stops being a road.*

It stopped being a road at a pair of iron gates.

They stood open, each one as tall as a tree, with the snow banked in drifts at their feet and a bird cut out of the iron at the center of each. Past them, the lane had been plowed to the width of a single car. Someone had cleared it recently, and well. Beside the gate stood a small stone lodge with a dark window and a line of smoke coming out of the chimney that wind took apart as soon as it rose.

She slowed. *Somebody lives there*, she thought, and then, *Somebody lives anywhere*, and that was not the comfort it ought to have been.

The lane climbed. Spruce trees closed over it, and then opened, and the house was there.

She had expected a ruin. Fifteen years of empty winters should have taken the roof and left the chimneys standing like teeth. Instead Harrowgate Manor rose out of the snow in three stories of gray stone, steep gables, and tall windows, and every window glowed gold. It looked less abandoned than held its breath. The center of the house was whole. The east wing was another matter. It stood off to the side of the main block like a thing that had been shut away, a black shape with boarded eyes and a roof of tarpaulin that snapped in the wind.

She parked beside a rusted station wagon. Only the one other car. Either the others had turned back or they were running later than she was.

You don't have to go in, she told herself. *You can turn the car around.* But she had not driven three hours to turn the car around, and that was the honest part of it, the part she had kept in the trunk of her mind all week. The joke explanation was for other people. She had a different reason, and it was almost certainly nothing.

Her mother had died two years ago in March, of a heart that had been telling her for a decade that it was finished. Ruth Ward had been a family doctor for forty years, the last twenty-seven of them in Hartley, and she had died the way she lived, correcting the nurses. But in the last week,

in the gray hours when morphine turns the walls to water, she had taken Lena's wrist in a grip that had no business being so strong and said, "I wronged someone. I wronged someone, Lena, and I never could undo it."

Lena had said, *You didn't, Mama. You never did a thing to anyone.* Her mother had looked at her with such terrible patience that Lena had understood, even then, that she had said the wrong thing.

Then the morphine had taken her under, and she never said it again.

It was the kind of remark Lena might have forgotten, if her life had held any other mysteries. It held only one. During her last two years of medical school, a body called the Wexley Foundation had paid her tuition in full, on the strength of an essay and a transcript, and had never once asked for a thank-you note. She had written three anyway. They had come back unopened, marked *no such office*.

A friend you wronged. Lena had read those four words in the hospital mailroom and felt her whole spine go cold. It was a coincidence. It had to be. Her mother had been dead two years, and the invitation had come to Lena, and what kind of person sends a dead woman's guilt to her daughter on cream paper?

The kind who would hold a dinner in a house like this one.

She got out of the car. The cold hit her face like a hand. She had worn her grandmother's black wool coat, which was too thin for this, over the only formal dress she owned, a black one with long sleeves and a high neck she had bought for a hospital gala and worn once. In her small clutch, she carried a penlight, a lip balm, two granola bars, and a spare pair of reading glasses. She was a woman who prepared for the worst out of habit and for the best out of nothing.

Under the dress, against the skin below her collarbone, lay the little wooden bird.

She touched it through the cloth as she crossed the snow. It was the size of her thumbnail, carved from some dark, close-grained wood and worn smooth, with a hole drilled through its neck for the chain. It had been clutched in her fist, her mother always said, on the day Lena came to her. *A gift from someone who loved you*, Ruth had said. *Keep it close.* Lena had worn it every day since she was five, and she could not have told anyone why it was the only thing in the world she was afraid to lose.